

Frank B. Ford
Greene Street Artists
5225 Greene Street
Philadelphia, PA 19144-2927
phone(215)848-7385; email vegt@netaxs.com

The Men

As a purple seeps into dirty snow, Gloria, up in 4B Oggelstone, shoves down the front of a balloonish party dress with both hands: it flares in the rear. "Italian Pumpkin look's okay but this Bo Peep shit is ridiculous!" she sneers to her image in the black window overlooking the courtyard. In back of her the console TV looms. *The Great Gatsby* is giving off, yellowishly, Gatsby's whites looking Clorox-stained. Indeed much of the production of this original cable musical has been tending towards brownish somehow, the color of dilute Lysol.

She turns round in a swish and squeak of orange to see Daisy stretching her arms upward, the undermanned orchestra straining for background ecstasy, and she can almost feel her own cellulite crunching--even though Dr Denslow Barrington on

the health channel had pronounced "Cellulite my foot! Just plain fat!"

"Oh yeah! Proof of the crummy pudding!" challenges Gloria, pointing to the dented marbling below her armpit. Gatsby, a blond soprano, appears terrified of the large-boned Daisy as he begins a tremulous song about "old sports" and money.

Trent's *Calvin Klein's Obsession For Men* is charged from the heat of his Miata. Soon he's dodging hunks of muddy ice while ridiculing the barracks-type apartments. "Such Class! And how long have you lived in Moscow, comrade Gloria? inquired the INFERNO of masculinity!" The outside door to Ogglestone is locked or jammed and Trent seeks another. At the rear courtyard a few people peer down from the lighted windows in a couple of buildings to skewed trashbarrels and a defunct basketball court, backboards splotched with rust stains where the hoops had been. "And pray what means this icy dishevelment?" exclaims Trent, picking his way through rocks of frozen slush. "And whatever happened to...?"-- here he assumes a radio announcer's resonance: "HEY YOU CASH-STRESSED BOYS AND GIRLS LISTENING TO FM-WHAM-

O-O-O-O-O, THE INTELLIGENT ECHO ECHO ECHO OF CONTEMPORARY SOUNDS
FOR THE YOUNG AND YOUNG AT HEART! SAY, WHY VACATION WHEN YOU
CAN LIVE AT RESKER GARDENS?...CABLE'S FREE, AND EVEN A
BASKETBALL COURT FOR ALL YOU WEEKEND LARRY BIRDS!"

"An-ddddddd when you finish the awwwwwwful, oh so s-WEATY
game you can splash on Calvin Klein's Obsession For Men"--Trent
almost sings--"thereby defining yourself as The Total Asshole
Yuppie Aspirant. *Whoa, young Trent! Does that not mean thou
also?*"

"Don't worry," he assures himself, "I'm not that good."
He skirts the pool, its covering tarp caved in where trash has
drifted into the middle. As his calfskin shoes punch through
the sooty crust on the snow, Trent worries, again in a little
dialog. *"00000! Puncturing your precious pumps, pretty boy? Be
a man!*

I am! Somewhat totally. At least it's in there somewhere.

*"Hmph! Too clever for your own good. Maybe you ARE gay,
as they seem to suspect high up on the corporate alp of
Dressler- Maximillian Industries!*

"Ah yes, that airy echelon of unquestioned Touchy-Feely
Butch! Do they DRUM up there, BRAVE-ly sitting hip to naked hip
while speaking of women and me, cupping each other's genitals
against the possibility of feminist guerrilla raids?

"The Corporate Sweat Lodge! Give me a break! But listen, and answer this, you dreary cynic, what exactly does turn them on except the impotence of power? And gay they say? They say gay, do they, these selfconsciously masculine men desiring to be queer and yet all aflutter at the bottom line? Well let me just tell the whole bent bunch of you that I will definitely prove the contrary to Gloria, master Xeroxer of the Engineering Department, this very evening!" Here he dances with an imaginary Gloria among McDonald wrappers and Styrofoam fragments, eventually kicking a Diet Coke can at the end of an unintended slide over blackened snow.

"Uh, given half the chance that is. And believe me she looks like the half-a-chance type." Trent giggles and trembles in the darkening cold. Most of the lights are out in the building in front of him, though some TVs flicker. "Am I having fun yet? *You silly ass, dancing with the filthy air--but I'll grant that you definitely are having a good time!*" He exhales vast puffs towards the redpurple sky, a frosty elongation on the horizon like a glowing crowbar. When he finally catches his breath he states "My God I'm happy. Wonder why that is sometimes. It comes from nowhere: a gift--every reason not to be and yet I am!"

Trent finally discovers an entrance, the door held open by

a brick, and walks up three flights of stairs covered with liver- colored carpeting, plywood creaking underneath. As he rings 4B, garbled voices rise behind the door. "Gloria?" Trent questions. A shirtless man with black hair epaulets flings it open. "Gloria, yeah sure!" he screams, eyes bulging a filmy yellow. "Gloria! Sure you don't mean Lucy? But Gloria's that's a nice name, *hey?* But Gloria's a nice name, *hey?* But Gloria's a nice name, *hey?*" And with each *hey* this hairy man strikes him increasingly hard about the head and shoulders, next spitting "Thought I was gone *hey?* Uh-uhhhhhhh, young fella, I waited for you to show up! That's what I did you little-squirt-faggot- honeybun!" He stops hitting a moment as Trent's knees buckle when he flings his arms up for balance and protection.

"The baits back in there and here's the hook!" By that time midway into the hall, the hairy man, smiling, boxes Trent's ears, breaking through quavering explanations as Trent staggers ever more backwards and then down a stair: "Gloria. I...came... I... mistake...I...please...! I...I'm NOT who...!"

"Yeah Gloria, sure Gloria! Uh huh! You got the wrong whore is all, right?"

Trent manages to turn around and run down the stairs to the outside. This time his ankles are ripped as he punches through the snow, blood instantly soaking them.

He hides behind the rolled up tennis net, his fingers thrust into its frozenness. "Try...stop...shaking!" he finally counsels himself. A filthy cake of snow drops from the sign bolted to the building: HUMPHREY. *Crazy guy in 4B Humphrey tried to kill me!* Trent hears himself phoning the cops from Gloria's apartment; behind him the hairy man crawls over the pool tarp.

Trent has the Humphrey entrance clearly in view. *I've got the cards, the visibility,* he assures himself. *Make my move out of here when I'm absolutely positive;* the man continues to crawl, stopping periodically when wind churns the debris in the center of the tarp, causing rattles and pings. Soon he slides down into that center, emerging after a moment with a length of pipe which assumes a gentle glow in the duskiness floating down from the scattering of lit windows.

For some reason Trent acutely, almost microscopically, pictures his gloves on the liverish rug before 4B Humphrey; the grinning oaf, about twenty feet in back of him, stops in hammocky sway; Trent hears, calms himself: *It's the wind.*

Gloria shakes her wrist to see if her watch has busted or something. Goes into the bedroom to check herself in the full-length mirror--again, and again the orange dress flies up in

front, and then in back. "Wizard of Oz," she now concludes, "alls I need is the magic wand and ruby-red slippers. No, that little girl had them, the slippers. Judy Garland. Or did they both have them, the nice witch too?" She asks this question standing at the window. Dimmest, urinous light spills down to Trent as panic issues from the TV: "Somebody's been hit with a car, struck down!" a pebbly bass voice rumbles, proclaiming, ceaselessly, the same dire thought as the screen pulses darkly as the Gatsby production employs a special effect.

She will say later on *Action-Force News!*, in quizzical response, that no, she didn't know she had been looking down to her date--according to co-anchor and award-winning news editor Mark Moran's question--"in fetal profile on the patchwork of snow and frozen mud, blood spread out from his mouth like a speech-balloon from a cartoon character?". His conceit is later echoed by the strident Leea Baron, a still of Gloria's pumpkin-colored dress and puzzled face fading at the telecast's end.

(She *had* phoned Mr Deedham on that unusual evening, the manager of the complex. "There's a drunk down there in the courtyard or something." "Oh Good-yyyyy," exhaling very slowly..."brings us up to quota this month.")

To Bertram Oldham, Esq., client opines that "He was one of these shy assholes who didn't talk up."

"I see. Well, D. A. insists you didn't give him much of a chance."

Client circles lit cigarette stub inside paper cup, meditatively hunching in prescribed dark suit, and resembling a large smudge on the heavy air. The room itself weighs in with squat furniture. He shrugs, then hoists bright eyes. "I...just didn't get right guy. Accident. Happen to anybody."

"I see. We've gone over this sufficiently."

"Nobody's fault."

"Well, you demonstrate no remorse and they'll make a lot of that in-nnnnn..." consulting his watch, "ten minutes or so."

"So? So what? What I pay you for? Come up with some bullshit or other."

"Quite right. Of course, it's uh against the law for me to coach you, so..."

"So you wouldn't do that. I know. There's a whole lot of fuckin things you wouldn't do on your own time."

"Whatever. Anyway, let's practice some. Uh, genuine remorse that is: th-ROWING our hands to our face like-a-SO!" Attorney demonstrates...tiny, popping slap, simultaneous

half-sob catching in his throat. "I'll show you when."

"When?" laughs attentive client, leaning forward.

"I'll touch my earlobe."

"You mean your ear?"

"This part of it, called the lobe," points attorney.

"Lobe-shmobe, never heard of it," shrugs massive client.

"Trust me."